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Abstract

U.S. understandings of violence and non-violence are often expressed in stereotypically simplistic terms by Americans and their critics. The maverick cowboy anti-hero who answers to his own code of honor, enforced by redemptive violence, is a quintessential symbol of this American ethos. An exploration of this theme in *Pale Rider*, *Pulp Fiction* and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, which center on the tension between violence and non-violence through an outlaw protagonist and his use of Judeo-Christian scriptures, suggests that the true complexity of the American popular moral theology of violence and non-violence is being addressed in film.

Introduction:

Film as a Microcosm of Religious Issues in the Contemporary U.S. Method

In 1995's *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, religious studies scholar Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. outlines a four-point method for isolating apocalyptic themes and imagery in popular U.S. film.¹ The criteria he proposes for film selection can be more broadly applied to the investigation of other religious themes, including the recurring images of the prophetic outlaw and the paradoxical juxtaposition of the righteous violence of prophetic judgment with the righteous non-violence of prophetic self-denial.

The first criterion is, of course, the theme itself. Second, Ostwalt focuses on films that are relevant, contemporary and popular. This criterion strengthens the religious scholar's argument regarding popular culture's interpretation of the selected theme because it implies that the film's popularity either results in widespread influence on a culture's beliefs and/or is attributable to its appeal to existing beliefs. Third, Ostwalt intentionally draws from a variety of film genres. Such a strategy again strengthens the argument that a particular religious image or theme has popular cultural significance by demonstrating that it is not just a feature of a specific genre but rather recurs throughout the popular medium as a whole. Finally, Ostwalt deliberately chooses films that, both individually and as a set,

exemplify the portrayal of the theme under scrutiny in contemporary U.S. film in general.

As he investigates apocalyptic themes and imagery in U.S. film, Ostwalt explores their biblical roots. Again, I believe that such a method has broader application and may be particularly useful to the study of more broadly-defined religious ideas at the core of popular films. First, he examines the films' overt references to scripture. Then, he probes more deeply, investigating references to what I might call "parascriptural sources"—midrash, legend, popular belief, superstition, Christian tradition, and so forth. In my own courses, as a theologian and professor of theology and ministry students, I add a third dimension to this study of what I might call "the biblical hermeneutics of film," analyzing each film's relationship to the original sources of the images/theme under consideration. Such an analysis includes a look at the film's expression, portrayal, articulation, or use of the sources; its interpretation of the sources and their relationship to the theme in question; and finally, its application of the sources, whether in the action of the characters or to the topic under study.

A U.S. popular theology of violence and non-violence

Since the millennium, the contemporary United States has been called the most violent society in world history. American understandings of violence and non-

violence are often expressed in stereotypically simplistic terms both by Americans ourselves and by our critics. The maverick cowboy anti-hero who answers to his own code of honor, enforced by redemptive violence, is a quintessential symbol of this American ethos. Yet an exploration of this theme in three films that center on the tension between violence and non-violence through an outlaw protagonist and his use of Judeo-Christian scriptures suggests that Americans and our critics have not addressed and perhaps not yet realized the true complexity of the American popular moral theology of violence and non-violence.

The films *Pale Rider*, *Pulp Fiction* and *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* illustrate the complex understandings of violence and non-violence in American popular culture through their common use of a scripture-quoting, gun-toting anti-hero. The films' critical and popular success suggests that American audiences and filmmakers clearly understand and accept each protagonist's paradoxical redemption through his own unique interpretation of the relationship between traditional religious teachings about righteousness and the apparently unrighteous use of violence.

Through commentary on scenes, characters, and dialogue from these three films, I will suggest that in spite of the biblical norm of non-violence embodied by the very scriptures each anti-hero quotes in these films, American filmmakers and audiences (like the protagonists themselves) consistently connect scriptures and

their religious heritage with an ethic of “righteous” or even “redemptive” violence. I will illustrate American moral evaluations of violence and non-violence through use of film references as well.

Finally, as a professor formerly of Christian ministry and now of theology in southern California, I would argue that it is vital for those in religious studies or even ministerial training to become fully acquainted with the outlaw prophet as American film icon, an archetype against which an actual religious leader can only pale in comparison. Knowing what Americans in and outside religious institutions think an effective minister should be—a gun-slinger quick to judge and quick to hang—can help religious leaders, students, and teachers to understand both false presuppositions about the ways that leaders of religious communities relate to people (judgment rather than compassion) and also the clear disappointment of the American public (in and out of churches) with non-violent religious leaders seemingly more true to the teachings of their tradition, yet who seem to be “weak.” Such issues may also help explain Americans’ resistance to seeing women as “real” leaders of religious / worshipping communities.

Pale Rider

This film’s title is derived from Revelation 6:8: “He who sat on the ashen [pale] horse had the name Death, and authority was given to kill with sword and with

famine and with pestilence and by the wild beasts of the earth.” Clint Eastwood’s character, known simply as “The Preacher,” rides a white horse dappled with pale gray, wears black, and has first spiritual and later physical power over life and death. The connection between the girl’s reading of this scripture and the first visual image of the Preacher signals the audience that the Preacher has the God-given authority to kill.

The film opens with another in a long string of raids on the Carbon Canyon miner’s camp by the thugs of a local tycoon, Coy LeHood (Richard Dysart). Young Megan Wheeler (Sydney Penny), who has already lost her grandfather to a raid, watches her dog killed and buries it. She prays Psalm 23 over the grave, expressing doubt in God’s existence and asking for a miracle. The next scene is a brief cutaway to Clint Eastwood’s character silently riding unseen into the valley.

Upon his arrival, Eastwood’s character defends the miners during a confrontation with LeHood’s thugs in town, during which they have refused to fight despite violence against them, their property and their families; insults and threats to their women; and public humiliation. Eastwood’s character, too, attempts to avoid personal violence, destroying weapons first and only hitting people when that first tactic fails. As miner Hull Barret (Michael Moriarty) brings the stranger home to Sarah Wheeler (Carrie Snodgrass) and her daughter Megan, Megan is reciting Revelation 6:4-8a. It is only after the stranger washes (revealing a badly scarred

back) and enters for dinner wearing his clerical collar that the family realizes he is not a gunslinger but a preacher.

When LeHood's thugs threaten him and the miners, the preacher refuses to leave on spiritual grounds "because there's a lot of sinners here," and "you wouldn't want me to leave before I finish my work," a seeming reference to Jesus' words in John 4:34. When the conflict becomes violent, the preacher beats up the strongest of the thugs, scaring them all off, and recites a common pseudo-biblical aphorism: "The Lord certainly does work in mysterious ways." The thugs report to LeHood, who is infuriated that the miners, whose spirits he had nearly broken, have a preacher in their midst. LeHood orders the preacher driven out, since a preacher can lead to faith, and once the miners have faith, they will be "dug in deeper than ticks on a boar."

Recognizing that making a martyr of the preacher could backfire, LeHood attempts to bribe him. However, the preacher cites Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:13: "You can't serve God and mammon both." In a scene that vaguely recalls Pontius Pilate's nervous encounter with the condemned Jesus, LeHood finally warns the unyielding preacher, "Any blood that gets spilt will be on your hands."

In the film's pivotal scene, after every form of negotiation with LeHood and his men has failed, the preacher opens a safety deposit box and exchanges his

clerical collar for a gun and bullets. In the final scene, the preacher personifies the ethic of violence and non-violence that has been present through the entire film, illustrating a spiral into violence that begins first with violence against machinery, then personal property, then in self-defense (but only as a last resort after scaring and outwitting people). After having sunk to that level of violence, he hides and shoots LeHood's deputies, who have been chasing and shooting at him, in the back. Finally, in an act clearly not self-defense, he shoots a man whose gun is still in its holster.

Like "*Shane*", a film remade here almost scene for scene and character for character, the preacher has returned to gunfighting after a failed attempt at living non-violently.² The epilogue of "*Shane*" is enlightening here. After murdering three gunfighters in a saloon to defend his tenant farmer friends from a cattle baron's thugs, Shane tells little Joe (this film's equivalent to Megan Wheeler), "Once you're a killer, you can't break the mold....Right and wrong is a brand, and a brand sticks." However, as Joseph K. Heumann and Robin L. Murray have observed, "*Pale Rider*" has a more complex and nuanced view of the relationship between good and evil (and thus I would argue between violence and non-violence) than classic Westerns like "*Shane*." The collective dimension of redemptive violence and resistance to violence are emphasized in "*Pale Rider*," whereas in "*Shane*," the focus is on individuals: "In order to save the land and their community, Eastwood

and the small miners' representative, Hull Barret, must visit on the corporation the same destruction as [hydraulic gold miner Coy] LaHood inflicted on the small [individual tin pan] miners and the environment," whereas Shane simply prevents Joe from participating in a fistfight. The emphasis on community resistance to violence is further exemplified in "*Pale Rider*" when Preacher says, "A man alone is easy prey....Only by standing together will you beat the LaHoods of the world," then seeks revenge against LaHood and his men not alone but with Barret, not to murder people (as LaHood and his men had done) but only to destroy hydraulic mining equipment. As Heumann and Murray conclude, "Although violence does provide 'regeneration'...in *Pale Rider*, it ultimately serves both a working class community and the natural world that sustains it," unlike the vigilante individualism of classic Westerns like "*Shane*."³

The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean

Phantly Bean in Kentucky, Roy Bean was introduced to the law enforcement as a member of the Los Angeles Rangers by his brother Major General Joshua Bean (also known as "General Frijoles"), the first mayor of San Diego. By the time this film opens, Phantly is believed to have killed at least two men, escaped from jail, and changed his name to "Roy." John Huston's film, though obviously a cartoonish sketch of the mythology of Bean and the Wild West, is framed on the basic characters and events of Bean's life: He bore the scars of being hanged by a mob at

eighteen for the rest of his life; married an eighteen-year-old Mexican woman when he was forty; and in 1882, before ever being officially appointed judge, erected his “Law West of the Pecos” sign on a courtroom-saloon, the Jersey Lily, near the train depot of a town he named Langtry.⁴ Since Langtry had no jail, Bean reputedly fined all crimes and kept the cash himself. With regard to righteousness and justice, he is reported to have said, “Hang ‘em first, try ‘em later.” He is even once said to have fined a dead man forty dollars for loitering, a scene depicted in Huston’s film as having taken place after Bean killed the man for shooting a picture of Lily Langtry, and thus a “justifiable homicide” in Bean’s view.

Although the film has been called a mediocre “pseudo-western” by most critics, it provides an interesting context for understanding the preacher / prophet anti-hero figure later central to both Eastwood’s celebrated Western *Pale Rider* and Tarantino’s urban *Western Pulp Fiction*. In Huston’s film, just after surviving his own hanging by an angry mob, Bean sees Huston’s caricature of a self-righteous Christian minister, Reverend LaSalle (Anthony Perkins), ride into town, and Bean takes him to be the devil, prefiguring his consequent confused battle against evil, where biblical authority itself (like LaSalle’s clerical authority) is interpreted in ways that oppose its intent.⁵ The reverend engages Bean in theological conversation about Bean’s massacre of those who tried to hang him, with the preacher both reading from the Bible and spewing such pseudo-biblical commentary as “They are

a stench and an abomination” and “Blessed is the Lord thy strength that teaches thy hands to war and fingers to fight.” The reading of actual scriptures is connected to LaSalle’s burial of the mob Bean has killed and most significantly includes Psalms 23 and 58:6-11. These verses from Psalm 58 appear in progressively more garbled fashion a total of four times in this film and will continue to provide a leitmotif for the entire film. In these opening scenes, the preacher’s Bible-quoting also reminds Bean, who has been browsing a book of Texas statutes and has appointed himself “the law” while the reverend digs graves and placed crosses for the mob Bean killed, that “vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.” (Deuteronomy 32:35, Hebrews 10:30, Romans 12:14) Huston repeatedly plays with the idea that the self-appointed American prophet and judge Bean misinterprets both this scripture and Psalm 58 as if they confirm that his violent jurisdiction is God-given. “God must have directed my bullets,” he gloats. It should be remembered that the Irish-born Huston made this film as the ill-advised U. S. war in Vietnam was ending, and that American self-understanding and behavior toward its perceived or imagined enemies appeared to many in and out of the U.S. to be much like Bean’s. (John Milius, who wrote the script for this film for director John Huston in 1972, himself had a complex, seemingly ambivalent, response to the Vietnam War. An avid gun enthusiast, he enlisted to fight with the Marines during the Vietnam era but failed the physical and turned to screenwriting, penning the script that would later become “*Apocalypse Now*.”⁶ Perhaps, then, the ironic tone of Huston’s film toward Bean’s

self-glorifying view of his own violent acts and vigilantism reflects Milius' own ambivalence to the war.

When the reverend asks Roy if he will now depend on God's grace, Bean prefers "practice. I intend to help Him out some." Bean's theology is one that can easily include righteous violence since it does not include any concept of grace or redemption. In his view, justice requires practice, and God needs help to dispense justice. As the scene continues, he informs the locals, "There's gonna be peace—above all, peace. And I don't care who I have to kill to get it." Again, there are significant parallels between the juxtaposition of war and peace, justice and grace, religion and public policy in the film and in a broader cultural sense (for example, personifying America's self-understanding as a kind of "outlaw saint" as opposed to the way it is seen globally as more of a bloodthirsty and willfully ignorant prophet).

After taking on some outlaw deputies, Bean sentences a murderer to death, paraphrasing Psalm 58:6-11, the scripture introduced to him in the film's opening scenes by Reverend LaSalle: "Verily it has come to pass that the wicked outlaws...their necks stretched out and broken....God has appointed a judge upon the earth." Later, when he kills his archenemy, the renegade outlaw Bad Bob the Albino, he paraphrases Psalm 58 again, getting even further from the original: "The righteous are gonna rejoice over the wicked...while God judges the earth through

me.” When his 650-pound, beer-guzzling black bear named Bruno which he used to attract rail passengers (depicted in the film as a sort of combination pet, best friend, and surrogate child) is killed by the local attorney’s hired gun after Langtry has achieved some prosperity, Bean recites the psalm at the bear’s grave: “His teeth have been blunted in his head, the great teeth of a young bear...but there is a reward for the righteous, courageous, and loyal, and that reward includes beer.” Bean’s post-script to this last recitation of the psalm, which has by now become almost unrecognizable, is followed by his observation that the bear will receive his reward “in heaven where I got no jurisdiction.”

Pulp Fiction

Of the three films examined here, “*Pulp Fiction*” is the most explicit with regard to both violence and theological reflection. Jules Winfield (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent Vega (John Travolta) are gangsters who work for Marcellus Wallace, “the Big Man” (Ving Rhames). Jules has a habit of quoting a jumbled paraphrase of Ezekiel 25:17 before murdering his victims. Like the outlaw prophets in the earlier films, he combines quoting the Bible with his own authoritative-sounding or at least self-empowering pseudo-biblical language:

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities [sic] of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who in the name of charity

and goodwill shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness [from Psalm 23], for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children.

(Interestingly enough, Psalm 23 appears in all three films, but never including verses 5 and 6.) Jules then actually directly quotes Ezekiel 25:17 but inserts "those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers" between 17a and b, and changes the third person plural pronoun "them" to the second person "you": "I will execute great vengeance upon those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers with wrathful chastisements. Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon you."

After he and Vincent walk away miraculously unscathed from a shootout with some of their boss Marcellus' "business partners," Jules seems to experience a spiritual awakening, a conversion of sorts, and announces his thoughts of retirement in the getaway car. "We should be dead....This was divine intervention...What happened here was a miracle." He even chastises Vincent for blasphemy when Vincent scoffs, "Jesus Christ!"

Later, over breakfast (after accidentally killing another victim and cleaning the mess from the car and themselves), Jules asks, "What is a miracle?...What's an act of God?" When the two can reach no agreement, he challenges Vincent, "You wanna play blind man, go walk with the shepherd [seeing eye dog]," then

concludes, “What is significant is that I felt the touch of God. God got involved....Why?” When Vincent asks him what he will do after retiring from gangster life, Jules, who has no model of non-violent redemption, is vague and unclear: “I’m gonna walk the earth like Cain in ‘Kung Fu’...till God puts me where He wants me to be.” Vincent continues to chide him, calling him “a bum,” the only way he can understand Jules’ aspirations to peace, simplicity and obedience (as personified in the reference to Cain from “*Kung Fu*”). Jules retorts, “If my answers frighten you, Vincent, then cease asking scary questions.”

In the scene which both opens and closes the film, armed robbers Yolanda (Amanda Plummer) and Ringo (Tim Roth) are holding up the diner where Jules and Vincent are having breakfast. In the final scene, Jules intervenes in the robbery attempt, holding a gun to Ringo’s head to stop the two from opening fire and is thus also able to get back his wallet and Marcellus’ briefcase. (The combination is 666.) However, he allows Roth’s character to keep the wallets of the other patrons and even the money from his own, saying, “I’m buying you your life” – the literal meaning of redemption. He again quotes his biblical jargon, ending with his paraphrase of Ezekiel 25:17, but this time attempts exegesis:

I been sayin' that shit for years. And if you ever heard it, it meant your ass.

I never really questioned what it meant. I thought it was just a cold-blooded thing to say to a motherfucker 'fore you popped a cap in his ass. But I

saw some shit this mornin' made me think twice. Now I'm thinkin', it could mean you're the evil man. And I'm the righteous man. And Mr. 9 millimeter here, he's the shepherd protecting my righteous ass in the valley of darkness. Or it could be you're the righteous man and I'm the shepherd and it's the world that's evil and selfish. I'd like that. But that shit ain't the truth. The truth is you're the weak. And I'm the tyranny of evil men. But I'm tryin'. I'm tryin' real hard to be a shepherd.⁷

The ambiguity of the relationship between redemptive violence and holy self-denial of violence seems to remain for the outlaw prophet to an even greater degree than in the earlier films. However, as renowned film critic Roger Ebert observes:

A theme running through the movie is that many of the weapons do not work or are not used as they are intended (the gun that misses Jules, the gun that kills Vincent, the gun that accidentally kills the guy in the backseat, the guns in the coffee shop robbery, the guns belonging to the pawn shop guys). After Jules is converted, his own gun PREVENTS violence in the coffee shop.⁸

Interpretation

In their 1997 scholarly article on “Pulp Fiction,” authors Dan Terkla and Thomas L. Reed, Jr. also momentarily link the film, redemptive violence, popular culture, and the Wild West:

When students of Western culture over the past thousand years or so have sat down to consider the ways heavily armed men have structured their relations with each other in the absence (or defiance) of any Transcendent Law, they have observed similar behavioral strategies. *Beowulf*, Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch*, and the more recent *Wild Bill*—all show that radical social flux leads men in search of stability and security to ally themselves with and to submit themselves to strong overlords. With no legal sanctions available beyond the comitatus or famiglia, the threat of reprisal is the only pacifier....Just as feudal and gangster cultures depend somewhat incongruously upon the threat of violence to keep the peace, so do they require their soldiers to maintain a delicate psychological equipoise between belligerence and graciousness.⁹

Their Machiavellian observation isn't particularly focused on the outlaw prophet of the American West (whether in the mid-nineteenth century California Territory of the Gold Rush Era, late-nineteenth-century Texas, or late twentieth-century Los Angeles) nor on the religious dimensions of the violence / non-violence tension in the film. Thus they make the broader point about balancing this tension but do not

explore the finer nuances of an American popular ethic of redemptive violence and non-violence and how popular views of religion inform this ethic.

Looking at all three films as representative of the American prophetic anti-hero ethic symbolized by the cowboy preacher / gangster shepherd, common elements of an American popular ethic of redemptive violence emerge in which violence is used against weapons, against property, and in self-defense. While violence against weapons, property, and self-defense seem to be presented and accepted as heroic, American filmmakers and audiences seem to view only violence against a defenseless person or creature as leaving room for moral doubt. Non-violence also takes several predictable forms in these films. Most of these forms of non-violence are portrayed and accepted as weak and undesirable: Refusal to use violence to defend oneself is weak, but refusal to defend one's property is worse, as seen in the Preacher's rallying of the mining community to defend their claims in *Pale Rider*. Refusal to use violence to defend one's family or friends in these films (even though they are also adults) is portrayed as a worse crime than murder, as in Big Man's changing attitude toward Jules and Vincent in *Pulp Fiction* as their relationship evolves. This portrayal of non-violence as weak may be what makes this popular ethic more distinctively American, particularly given that in popular films such as this, it is connected with a religious outlook.

The juxtaposition of this ethic with religious leadership suggests an even more peculiarly American view of what makes an effective prophet or shepherd: The outlaw prophet is outside or beyond the law, is an instrument of God's judgment, is a protector of the weak (by any means necessary), and cites Judeo-Christian scriptures (though not necessarily with accuracy). To be non-violent is to be weak and thus to be an ineffective shepherd / judge (like Reverend La Salle in *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* or some of the men in *Pale Rider*). In 1999, I had the opportunity to discuss these films with Tokiyuki Nobuhara, then the editor of *The Kyoto Times*, and thirty Japanese pastors from Christian churches in Nagasaki at the Japan Global Academy for Pastors, which they interpreted in light of their observations (as survivors of the U.S. bombing of Nagasaki) of American understandings of non-violence and violence--what they called American Christians' "cowboy mentality." This discussion confirmed my belief that this paper specifically and this kind of inquiry into the American idea of redemptive violence in general can make an important contribution to bringing to light un-Christian-like assumptions about violence and non-violence that infect American culture and Christianity and prevent spiritual and intellectual fellowship between Americans and Christians of all other cultures.

Understanding the ethic of violence and non-violence expressed in American pop culture and religion makes Jules' exegesis of Ezekiel 25:17 and

Psalm 23 at the close of *Pulp Fiction* even more powerful as a true conversion. As he explains as the film ends, interpreting his miraculous survival of the morning shootout (along with not only his partner Vincent but also one of the people he was sent to punish) from his old hermeneutic of violent judgment at first led him to consider two possible alternatives: “You’re the evil man, I’m the righteous man, and the gun is the shepherd” (violence protects good people from bad people) or “You’re the righteous man, I’m the shepherd, and the world is evil” (all people are basically good; it’s just the world that’s fallen or evil). However, from a new (“true”) hermeneutic of nonviolent and literally pastoral redemption, Jules has a less positive view of human nature yet has also seemingly has rejected the view that violence can be redemptive: “You’re the weak, I’m the tyranny of evil men. But I’m tryin’ real hard to be the shepherd.”

¹ Ostwalt, C. E., Jr., 1995, “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation.” *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth and Ideology in Popular American Film*. Martin, J. W. and Ostwalt, C. E., Jr., ed. Boulder CO: Westview, 55.

² Reiher, P., 2000, “Movie Reviews: *Pale Rider*.” <http://ficus-www.cs.ucla.edu/project-members/reiher/reviews/pale.html>. April 16.

³ Heumann, J. K., and Murray, R. L., 2004, “*Pale Rider*: Environmental politics, Eastwood style.” *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 47. <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc47.2005/palerider/text.html>.

⁴ Rasmussen, C., 1999, “San Gabriel Left a Mark on Roy Bean.” *San Bernardino County Sun*. December 15, A3.

⁵ Green, D., 2000, Review: The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean.” <http://www.laserrot.com/ldreviews/us/l/11174.html>.> April 16.

⁶ Stayton, R., 2006, "A Barbarian Inside the Gates: Back to the Golden Rule Days with John Milius." Written By: *The Magazine of the Writers Guild of America*, West (October). <http://www.wga.org/writtenby/writtenbysub.aspx?id=2239>.

⁷ Quentin Tarantino, Q., 1994, *Pulp Fiction*. Miramax.

⁸ Ebert, R. 2000, "Secrets of Pulp Fiction." <http://www.moviescripts.de/pf_secrets.html>. April 16.

⁹ Terkla, D. and Reed, T. L., Jr., 2000, "I'm gonna git Medieval on your ass": *Pulp Fiction* for the 90s--the 1190s." *Studies in Popular Culture* 1997. <<http://www.mtsu.edu/~english/terkla.htm>>. April 16.

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